

Veterinary History Histoire vétérinaire

Veterinarians without Borders/Vétérinaires sans frontières-Canada – The first 10 years (2005–2015)

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In May of 2015, Veterinarians without Borders/Vétérinaires sans frontières-Canada (VWB/VSF) celebrated 10 years of operation. The decade after 2005 has been characterized by dramatic changes in the national and global economic and political landscape, but thanks to the dedication and talent of volunteers and staff, VWB/VSF not only survived, but is also looking ahead to a very promising second decade. Even as members of the organization look ahead, VWB/VSF can look back with pride on the remarkable work it has done improving the lives of some of the world's poorest people through better care and management of livestock, improvements to the health of animals and humans, and attention to the natural environment.

Origins

Veterinarians without Borders/Vétérinaires sans frontières-Canada (VWB/VSF) was initiated in late November, 2004 in response to a telephone call from Alden Hadwen, Community Relations Director for Aeroplan Corporation. The corporation was launching a new program, "Beyond Miles," to give support to a select group of Canadian charitable organizations. They had already identified Engineers without Borders, Doctors without Borders, and the Stephen Lewis Foundation, among others. Ms. Hadwen, as a granddaughter of Seymour Hadwen, one of only 4 Canadian veterinarians to have been elected to the Royal Society (1), wondered if there was a "without Borders" organization for veterinarians in Canada.

Within about 48 hours, it was determined that although there were VWB/VSF groups in Europe and a pan-European coalition called VSF-Europa, there was no central global body (as there is for Doctors without Borders), and no national group based in the western hemisphere. Because of their independent origins veterinary organizations with similar "without borders" goals have had different names. On the international stage, in order to avoid confusion, we refer to each other as VSF-followed by the country name. Within Canada, because we are registered as a bilingual organization, we use the VWB/VSF abbreviation. Over the next few weeks a team was assembled that included veterinarians from government, academia, private practice, and non-government organizations. The group included Drs. David Waltner-Toews, Brian Ausman, Erin Fraser, Wayne McDonell, Craig Stephen, Enid Stiles, Jeff Davidson, John VanLeeuwen,

Normand Larivière, Susan Kutz, Andrew Peregrine, Dominique Charron, and Dale Smith. Mira Ziolo, an OVC student who was coordinating an internationally focused Canadian veterinary student organization, was student liaison. Drs. Waltner-Toews, Stiles, and VanLeeuwen, in that order, have been the first three presidents of VWB/VSF. Dr. Fraser has been the Program Manager and Executive Director of VWB/VSF since its inception.

By May of 2005, facilitated by the persistent, diligent — and pro bono — efforts of Dr. Brian Ausman (DVM, MBA, LLB), VWB/VSF was officially established as a registered charity. In recent years, Dr. Doug Jack (LLB) has provided pro bono law advice.

First steps

In the first 2 years VWB/VSF's international efforts were small, collaborative, and eclectic, reflecting the interests of its founders, trends in the international animal health community, and financial constraints. First initiatives included work on domesticated reindeer in Mongolia, on community-based management of free-roaming dog populations in Guatemala and remote regions of Canada, control of avian influenza among backyard farmers in Southeast Asia and Africa, aquaculture and veterinary public health in Sri Lanka (2), herd health programs with dairy cooperatives in Malawi and Kenya, and backyard swine management in Kenya (3). Canadian partners included individuals at the Universities of Guelph, Prince Edward Island, Saskatchewan, and Montreal. Unitera, a Canadian volunteer-sending organization, provided the first long-term vet volunteer opportunities in Malawi.

The early years were a time to define the organization's focus and values. There was a clear decision to avoid "helicopter medicine," in which veterinarians from wealthy countries fly to a poor community, do work which may in itself be valuable, but then leave without facilitating long-term veterinary capacity. Similarly, based on costs, logistics, and unmet international needs, a clear focus emerged around sustainable programs that integrate animal, human, and ecosystem health (4).

For 2 years VWB/VSF depended on Aeroplan miles, dedicated volunteers, and veterinarians who came with existing, partly funded projects that they wished to develop further.

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VWB/VSF also supported Canadian veterinary students to go abroad to learn about international veterinary medicine through already existing “Global Vets” programs at Canada’s veterinary schools.

The office was a desk at the University of Guelph, a cell phone, and a website created by Kelvin MacQuarrie from the OVC IT group. During that time, VWB/VSF received both in-kind and financial support from private donors, private industry including Schering-Plough, Marine Harvest, Centaur-VA Animal Health, LifeLearn, “The Portables,” and from The Veterinary Pharmacy, the Office of the Chief Veterinary Officer of Canada, the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association, and the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture.

In 2006, VWB/VSF approached Dr. Brian Evans, Canada’s Chief Veterinary Officer, for support from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). The reasoning was that although CFIA’s mandate is domestic, if Canadian producers were concerned about infectious diseases such as avian influenza entering Canada, then there was a strong domestic argument to be made for building veterinary capacity in other parts of the world. This would not only help prevent epidemics at source, but would also create a cadre of Canadian veterinarians who understood the complex issues of animal health in a global context. In 2007, VWB/VSF signed an unprecedented contribution agreement with CFIA; since then the agency has been a strong supporter of the work of VWB/VSF.

Major achievements

Since its inception, VWB/VSF has worked closely with several other VSF organizations, as well as with governmental and private partners in Asia, southeast Asia, and Africa. Representatives of VWB/VSF have signed Memoranda of Understanding with the CVMA and the World Veterinary Association, and the International Livestock Research Institute; VWB/VSF was a founding member of the new VSF-International (formerly VSF-Europa). With support from the CFIA, Aeroplan, Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Canadian International Development Agency (now Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development), and a variety of private donors, VWB/VSF has launched or partnered in programs in Africa (Ghana, Senegal, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan); Latin America (Chile, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru); Asia [Sri Lanka, Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Laos), Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China]; and Canada [supporting canine programs in the Sahtu region of the Northwest Territories and Kuujjuak, Nunavik through the Calgary and Montreal Veterinary Colleges (5)]. VWB/VSF’s Global Internship Program has recruited over 115 veterinary students from all 5 Canadian veterinary colleges and trained and deployed them to placements in over 20 countries around the world.

Latin America

Beginning in 2006, VWB/VSF volunteer veterinarians, interns, and technicians worked with local veterinarians and volunteers as well as the Guatemalan veterinary school to establish an evidence-based community-based canine management program

in Todos Santos, Guatemala, which has since been replicated in other villages (6,7). In 2013, the leadership for this project was transferred to a Chilean-based organization called the Global Alliance for Animals and People (GAAP). VWB/VSF continues to support this important work through travel support for volunteers and GAAP staff.

East Africa

In Tanzania, a poultry initiative was started in 2007 by VWB/VSF volunteer, Dr. Roger Thomson, and Tanzanian veterinarian, Dr. Uswega Minga, from the Open University of Tanzania (8). The program has evolved into a “train the trainer” program that began in 1 village in 2010 with 6 teachers and 50 “student farmers,” and has grown to include 3 villages, 16 teachers and 130 “student farmers.” VWB/VSF interns have been a critical part of this initiative’s success.

In Kenya, Dr. John VanLeeuwen of UPEI, with students, interns, and the Canadian organization Farmers Helping Farmers, has worked with the Mukurweini Wakulima Dairy Ltd. (9–14). This work led to increases in total milk yield from 18 000 L of milk per day to more than 30 000 L/d. Over 1000 farmers, mostly women, and 41 animal health workers, have been trained in cattle health management.

In Uganda, a goat pass-on and paravet-training project, representing a collaborative effort between VWB/VSF, the Foundation for AIDS-Orphaned Children, WCVI’s Dr. Claire Card, and many student interns, has worked with deeply impoverished HIV/AIDS-affected households. The project has grown from an initial intervention that involved 8 women’s groups in 2008 to 17 in 2015.

In 2013, VWB/VSF initiated a joint project with VSF-Germany in the newly created country of South Sudan, funded by the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development. This project, working with refugees and the communities that host them, sought to build sustainable solutions that could contribute to lasting peace in the region. Over 2 years 167 000 animals were vaccinated, de-wormed, and treated for injury or infection, 43 community animal health workers were trained, 3 community animal health centers were established, 2 hygienic slaughter facilities were constructed, 23 butchers trained, and 19.7 tonnes of meat were distributed to 4645 households. Also, 243 women-headed households were set up for poultry production. VWB/VSF and its partners are hoping to build on this success in South Sudan with future food security projects.

Southeast Asia

Given the initial impetus from the CFIA to deal with avian influenza, and a focus by Canada’s IDRC on building capacity for ecosystem approaches to health (Ecohealth) in southeast and east Asia, VWB/VSF has been a key player in regional Ecohealth networks in east and southeast Asia (Laos, Cambodia, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand). VWB/VSF has led the creation, testing, and publication of an Ecohealth training manual for southeast Asia (as part of an IDRC-funded regional Field Building Leadership Initiative), as well as a compendium of one-health projects from around the world. All are available for free for download at www.vetswithoutborders.ca.

Recognizing that building animal health and one health capacity involves work at many levels and with different partners, VWB/VSF, in partnership with the National University of Laos and VSF-France, has developed and implemented projects in Lao PDR and Cambodia. Successes in the program have included integrated animal and human community health days, canine rabies vaccination, and public education programs, including information on diet and nutrition. VWB/VSF staff, volunteers, and partners have trained and supported Primary Animal Health Workers (PAHWs) and Extension Farmers to improve their skills and experience in animal healthcare, disease prevention, and animal management. They have successfully encouraged communities to improve their animal health and management practices (15).

Two innovative highlights deserve special mention. Fifteen households (14 women) have started producing edible crickets and produced 115 kg after just 2 months of operation. Secondly, PAHWs have begun using a new smartphone app, developed in partnership with LifeLearn Inc., for learning and reference, solving problems on poultry-raising (feed, housing, egg production), sharing information with farmers, consulting with peers, and using pictures for diagnosis of ailments in pigs and goats.

In conclusion, VWB/VSF's first 10 years have been a period of intense learning. Members of the organization have learned that there is an enormous unserved need for ecologically balanced animal health support throughout the developing world. They have learned to navigate the complex world of international development funding in order to secure resources for this important work. Members have learned how to build effective partnerships with other VSF organizations as well as local communities and governments in order to maximize the effectiveness of international initiatives. They have learned that animal health is a critical, and largely ignored aspect of humanitarian assistance that can have a huge impact on the health and livelihoods of the people involved. And members have learned that there are many generous, talented, dedicated people in the Canadian animal health community who are willing to contribute their time, talents, and resources to help create sustainable animal health capacity in northern Canada, Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

With that valuable education in hand, VWB/VSF is calling on veterinarians and other members of the animal health community to join this important cause. With the support of veterinarians from all across the country, VWB/VSF's second decade promises to be bigger, better, and more exciting than the first.

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